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The Mansion House Council.

AN APPEAL.

By Sir HENRY CUNNINGHAM, K.C.I.E.,
Member of the Central Sanitary Aid Committee.

THE Society known as the "Mansion House Council" has for the last six years been engaged in promoting a more effectual enforcement of the Acts which regulate the sanitary condition of the dwellings of the working-classes in London. Having now, by practical experience, assured themselves as to the nature and extent of the evils to be met and the efficiency of the Society's action in removing or mitigating those evils, the Committee appeal with confidence to their fellow-citizens to enable them to enlarge their sphere of operations, and to apply generally throughout the Metropolis a method, which, owing to the narrow means at the Society's command, it has hitherto been possible to apply only in a few specially selected localities.

It is certain that, besides the legal expenditure on pauperism, several millions sterling are devoted annually in London to "charity," public or private. The results are, it must be feared, not altogether encouraging. Scarcely any sensible impression is made on the mass of misery and degradation. Much of the charitable outlay is, in the opinion of those who are best acquainted with the subject, actually

mischievous. Even when judiciously given it must necessarily tend to encourage improvident habits, and to sap the honourable sense of independence.

No one can guess to what lengths our present eleemosynary system may not be conducting us. Year by year a larger sum is required, and the claims for extraneous aid become more serious. Already free education, the feeding of 40,000 half-starved school-children, the supply of house-room to the working classes to be provided, more or less at the public cost, are formidable steps in the direction of communism. The advocates of these measures recognise their grave consequences, but justify them as necessary palliatives of intolerable evils.

In the midst of these vast and often unsuccessful efforts of philanthropy, it is an extraordinary fact that in one plain, practical, but all-important respect, the legal rights of the poor have been for years past, and still are, systematically denied to them—rights which affect their physical and moral well being more vitally than any others in the whole sphere of legislation. They are the rights which are declared by the various statutes which provide for the sanitation of their dwellings. These laws deal in a most searching and peremptory manner with every branch of the subject, and if they were properly enforced would go far towards removing all the chief causes of preventible disease. Unfortunately they are, in many instances, a dead letter, and in others are so inadequately administered as to do but little of the good which they are calculated, and were, no doubt, expected to produce. The defect is not in the law. Not only are the

powers of the sanitary authorities most extensive; but, to guard against possible neglect, the Legislature has rendered the exercise of those powers by the bodies to whom they are entrusted, obligatory, not discretional. The Housing of Working Classes Act, 1855, s. 7, provides that "it shall be the duty of every local authority, entrusted with the execution of the laws relating to public health and local government, to put in force, from time to time, the powers with which they are entrusted, so as to secure the proper sanitary condition of all premises within the area under the control of such authority." Every local authority, accordingly, which does not so exercise its statutory powers as to secure the proper sanitation of all premises within its jurisdiction, is breaking not only the spirit, but the letter of the law.

Efficient sanitation has a direct money value for the working classes of immense importance. Every day's illness costs a labouring man the wage which he might have earned, besides all the incidental expenses of illness; while the death of the wage-earner often plunges an entire family into destitution. Sir James Paget has stated* that the statistics of friendly societies and other similar bodies favour the "belief that the whole population, between fifteen and sixty-five years old, do, in each year, twenty million weeks work less than they might do if it were not for sickness." Estimating this, for the "domestic, industrial, and agricultural classes," as numbering seven and a half millions, he puts their loss at eleven millions sterling. "No one," he adds, "who lives

* International Health Exhibition, 18th June, 1884.

among the sick can doubt that a very large proportion of the sickness and loss of work which he sees might have been prevented." He reckons this preventable proportion at one fourth, in which case the loss thus inflicted on the working classes must be nearly three millions yearly. One entirely preventable disease, typhoid fever, causes, he reckons, an annual loss of 230,000 weeks of work to those who survive it; without reckoning what is lost by the premature deaths of those who succumb.

Testimony to the same effect was borne by the Royal Commissioners in 1885. Speaking of the housing of the poor in the low parts of London, they say that "the statistics of actual disease consequent upon overcrowding would not convey the whole truth as to the loss of health occasioned by it to the labouring classes. Some years ago the Board of Health instituted inquiries in the low neighbourhoods to see what was the amount of labour lost in the year, not by illness, but by sheer exhaustion and inability to do work. It was found that, upon the lowest average, every workman or workwoman lost about twenty days in the year from simple exhaustion. . . There can be little doubt that the same thing is going on now, perhaps even to a greater extent."

The labouring classes have, accordingly, a direct money interest in the improvement of the public health; and systematic neglect of measures directed by the Legislature for this object is a legal wrong inflicted on the poor, robbing them of advantages to which the law entitles them, and which, if they had the same power as the richer classes,

they would insist upon obtaining. How long would the inhabitants of St. James's Square or Portland Place submit, if their sanitary authorities permitted the existence of gross breaches of the law? Yet the inhabitants of Bethnal Green have just as much right that the law should be properly administered as have their wealthy fellow-citizens at the West End.

The poorer classes are, however, too ignorant, too feeble, too resourceless to put in force the remedies which the Legislature provides for the inadequate discharge by public bodies of their duties in respect of sanitation. They neither know what their rights are, nor, if they did know, would they, as a rule, venture to come into collision with their landlord by invoking the aid of a public authority or setting the law in motion. To do so is often a costly and difficult process, involving an expenditure quite beyond the poor man's means, and co-operation with others, which it is impossible for him to effect. Moreover, a large proportion of them are migratory. Lord Shaftesbury told the Commission (1884) that there were 60,000 to 70,000 people in London who seldom remained three months in any one place; and that the Rector of Regent Street, Gordon Square, stated that in the whole of his district he did not believe that there was a single family who had been there more than three months—they were always on the move."

A population so circumstanced is but little able to assert its rights either against landlords or the official custodians of the public health. The result is that in numerous instances landlords do not comply with the

requirements of the law, and that vestries and district boards fail to discharge, with any reasonable adequacy, the duties of supervision and interference which are imposed on them by the Legislature in respect of the dwellings of the poor. The Royal Commissioners of 1885 reported that, at the outset of their inquiry, they had testimony to prove that though there had been much legislation designed to meet overcrowding and other like evils, "yet that the existing laws were not put in force, some of them having remained a dead letter from the date when they first found place in the statute book." The humbler classes of London tenants, accordingly, lose the benefit of enactments designed to protect them from the miseries and loss incidental to unhealthy dwellings.

Apart from the injustice and cruelty involved in such cases to the immediate victims of the default, the consequences are really of national importance. Fifteen millions of the inhabitants of England live in great cities, as against ten millions who live in the country. The repeated diminution of the standard allowed for military recruits is a practical admission that the class from which recruits are taken is undergoing physical deterioration.

Dr. Ogle, the Superintendent of Statistics at the Registrar-General's Office, has recently shown that, to judge by the statistics of fifteen agricultural counties, the rural population (including in that all county towns with less than 5,000 inhabitants), instead of increasing normally, has of late years declined. Some counties show a decline of 6, 9, 10, and even 12 per cent. In Huntingdonshire,

where the diminution is greatest, the rural population, which would, at the rate of the first half of the century, have been in 1881 79,000, numbered only 53,000; agricultural labourers had diminished by 21 per cent. In other words, a single county had sent 26,000 persons into the towns, and the agricultural class had diminished by more than a fifth. Dr. Ogle points out how serious a detriment to the national health is the removal of the most vigorous portion of the healthiest classes to the unwholesome influences of city life, and how, so long as cities continue to be less healthy than the country, it tends to the resurvival of the unfittest. Our city population increases, overcrowding becomes yearly more severe, and the importance of protecting the inhabitants from the evils inseparable from their condition becomes greater and greater.

The low rate of mortality, which is exhibited by the metropolis, is sometimes urged in support of the contention that no serious evils prevail, and that the sanitary condition of the population is, on the whole, satisfactory. Any such inference, however, would require material modification to bring it all into harmony with the real facts of the case. The death-rate of the opulent and well-housed classes, who occupy localities where sanitation is efficiently carried out, and who recruit their health by frequent and prolonged sojourns in the country, is indeed very low; but the rates which prevail in the filthy, badly built, badly drained, unrepaired, ill-ventilated, and overcrowded tenements, in which the poorer classes reside, are more than twice as high as those of healthy country districts, and even those which

exist in healthier localities in suburban London.* The statistics recently brought forward by Dr. Williams-Freeman,† show that the loss of life of persons below the age of fifteen is 100 per cent higher in the crowded parts of London than it is in healthy country places.

Dr. Williams-Freeman points out that the higher death rate of urban London, as compared with healthy country districts, involves the yearly sacrifice of 25,599 lives. If we accept the usual estimate of sanitary experts that each death implies twenty cases of severe disease, we arrive at a total of more than 500,000 yearly cases of illness attributable to the unhealthy conditions of life in urban London.

Further testimony to a like effect is borne by another medical authority who‡ has searched for four years in vain to find a single case in which a working-man, his two parents, and his four grandparents, were all bred and born in London. The fact that more than a third of the inhabitants of London is country-bred, favours the conclusion that the increase of its population is owing to incessant recruiting from the country, not to the vitality of its permanent inhabitants, who, if not reinforced by a large

	Death rate per mille.	Deaths of Persons under 15, per mille.
* Whitechapel	35·35	... 378
Strand	32·51	... 422
Lewisham	16·24	... 218
Healthy Country Districts ...	15·45	... 196

† "The Effect of Town Life on the General Health." J. P. Williams-Freeman, M.D.

‡ "Degeneration amongst Londoners." By Dr. Cantlie, late Assistant-Surgeon, Charing Cross Hospital.

inflow of healthy lives, would die out in two or three generations.

The absorption, deterioration, and gradual extinction of the most vigorous portion of the rural classes in the Metropolis has a serious moral aspect. The "unemployed" classes of London, its 100,000 paupers, and those who toil painfully for a starvation pittance, are, to a large extent, persons who compete at a disadvantage with the more vigorous immigrants from the country, and are displaced by them. "Irregular labour," says Dr. Williams-Freeman, "odd jobs, sweaters' dens, prostitution, subsistence on charity, agitation, 'demonstrations,' and riot, are only some of the struggles of the dying Londoner, before he pays the debt of nature, whose laws he has had no power to obey."

The gravity of this evil was authoritatively established by the finding of the Royal Commission of 1884, and for the last thirty years the Legislature has endeavoured by one enactment and another to discover some remedy for what all admit to be a national danger and disgrace. The general result is that a large part, at any rate, of the existing evils arise not from defective legislation (for the existing laws, though capable of improvement in details, are ample for all principal purposes), nor from the inherent and insurmountable difficulties of the case, but from the simple fact that, in a large number of instances, the bodies, to whom the care of the public health is entrusted, systematically and intentionally neglect their duties.

The truth of this assertion is unhappily beyond dispute. Glaring instances are brought forward from time to time in

the public prints of houses, the sanitary condition of which would be incredible in any civilised community were it not established by unquestionable evidence. Wretched and dilapidated tenements, unsupplied with the legal minimum of air, light, water, or space ; with no proper conveniences, affording no adequate protection against wind and rain or cold ; their ill-constructed drains, reeking with sewage effluvium ; their ill-paved yards, exhaling the vapours of a polluted soil ; their walls rotting with damp—such are the homes of thousands of the London poor. Their horrors are intensified by the numbers who, in defiance of the law, are crowded into them, and whose habits aggravate the effect of every existent insanitary condition Such abodes are fatal to all endeavours to raise the physical or moral condition of the unfortunate classes whose necessities condemn them to such a residence. Why should we go on year after year condoning and perpetuating their existence ? Why not enforce the remedies which the Legislature has provided ?

This task has been attempted for the last six years by the Mansion House Council. The object of this society—which, by the kindness of successive Lord Mayors, has been allowed to hold its meetings at the Mansion House—is to provide in each parish a body of independent persons with adequate knowledge and experience, who, with no other object but that of securing to the poor the benefits which the Legislature has provided for them, will inquire into the sanitary condition of the poorer quarters, will ascertain whether grievances exist, and, if they do, will call

the attention of the proper authorities to them, and, when other expedients fail, will set the law in motion. To do all this with promptitude, thoroughness, and efficiency, is a task which no isolated individual could accomplish. The Mansion House Council endeavours to provide adequate machinery for its accomplishment. Voluntary committees have been constituted in twenty-two parishes, and two inspectors employed by the Council brought to light, in the course of last year, no less than three thousand cases of insanitation, which have, in consequence of the Council's representations, been properly dealt with, either by the owners of the property or the authorities. In several parishes, where the general average of sanitation was especially low, the Home Secretary has, at the Society's request, caused a public inquiry to be held into the condition of the tenements occupied by the poor, and this has in every instance been attended by excellent results. In Rotherhithe, Bethnal Green, Mile End, and Clerkenwell inquiries of this nature have been held.

Important, however, as has been the work accomplished by the Council, it is on a scale wholly incommensurate with the area of the Metropolis and the gravity of the evils which have to be dealt with. At present the Committee are greatly circumscribed by the narrowness of their resources, and are obliged to leave many crying wants neglected for want of funds to carry on the work. The Society's operations have but touched the fringe of the evil; an equal necessity exists in almost all the poorer parishes of London. The Committee have established a

good reputation for the care with which their inquiries are conducted, the accuracy of their reports, and the reasonable and moderate character of their demands. Several of the London magistrates show a marked inclination to co-operate with the Society in insisting on reform and in awarding due punishment to infringements of the law. The Committee could with ease find ample employment for ten inspectors, and they believe that with such a staff a degree of supervision might be exercised which would in course of time render impossible such gross breaches of the law as are now habitual. They believe that many persons will agree with them that money cannot be more wisely and profitably employed on behalf of the poor than in enforcing the provisions which the Legislature has enacted with regard to the sanitary condition of these dwellings, provisions which are now too often a dead letter, but which, if conscientiously and vigorously enforced, would go a long way toward remedying one of the main sources of misery and degradation with which modern society has to contend.

Donations and subscriptions may be sent to the RT. HON. THE LORD MAYOR *at the Mansion House, or to the Hon. Sec.*, MR. JOHN HAMER, 31, *Imperial Buildings, Ludgate Circus, E.C.*

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